CORRESPONDENCE

ENGLISH NAMES OF MAMMALS

To the Editor, Journal of Mammalogy:

Not long ago it was my privilege to appear in "The Auk" as an advocate of English, that is, truly popular names for birds. The matter is largely a literary one, but all are agreed that popular knowledge of the bird is greatly helped by an exact, right, and acceptable name.

Precisely the same thought applies to Mammals, and I hope you will allow me to discuss it here.

For the diffusion of knowledge in an English-speaking country, one must have English names; a name to be popular in our language must be short and descriptive. It must be different from other names. If a foreign word, it must be composed of the sounds represented in our alphabet. It should tie the creature up with familiar ideas. It must be easily said, and it must be pat. It should be a monosyllable, or if of more than one syllable, it should have the accent on the first; otherwise it will hardly be English, and will stand much less chance of success.

Those of us who have known the west for a generation, have witnessed the triumphant march of the monosyllable.

The victory of 'peak' over 'mountain,' 'gun' over 'revolver,' 'rope' over 'lariat,' are cases in point. Or to keep to animal illustrations, note the displacement of 'Lobo' by 'Wolf,' of 'broncho' and 'cayuse' by 'horse,' of 'Kit-fox by 'Swift,' of 'Polecat' by 'Skunk.'

The usual shortening of the word and the forward trend of the accent are shown in the successive names of *Canis latrans*. The early travellers bade us call it 'Small Prairie Wolf.' Then the word 'Coyote' (coy-o′-te) came from the South, with its three full syllables, the accent on the second. But the inevitable process set in, when it got beyond Mexican influence. It was shortened to 'Coyote' (coy′-ote), and sometimes flattened to 'Kyute' (ky′-ute).

Again 'sewellel' or 'showtl' are accepted book names of the 'Aplodontia.' They are fairly well established, good in construction; and probably unlike the original Indian words, for they have been Englished; but still they have no foothold in the memory, and are being very hard pressed by the undesirable names, 'Mountain Beaver' and 'Blue Muskrat,' which, being constructed of familiar elements, may put out the other names altogether.

'Prairie Marmot' is an example of bookish absurdity. Of course, it would not stand up against the pat 'Prairie-dog,' which in spite of one hundred years of books, is now firmly established in the books themselves.

Similarly no doubt, the victory of the strong, angular word 'Rabbit' over the shorter and rather featureless word 'Hare' is due to its patness, and the ease with which it may be said and remembered.

Among the animal names which have succumbed to these inevitable forces, I might further illustrate 'Wood-hare,' as the bookmen insisted on calling it for two hundred years, now admitted to be 'Cottontail;' 'Jackass hare' or 'Prairie hare' now 'Jack-rabbit;' 'Bay-lynx' now 'Bobcat;' 'Mephitic Weasel' now 'Skunk;' 'Striped Groundsquirrel,' now 'Chipmunk,' while 'Pika' and 'Little Chief Hare' have surrendered to 'Coney.'

The 'Varying Hare' of the bookmen is now fully established as the 'Snowshoe Rabbit.' The 'Maryland Marmot' is the 'Woodchuck,' and the 'Argali' of the early writers is now wholly and exclusively the 'Big-horn' or 'Mountain Sheep.' Sad to relate, however, I see many evidences that the monosyllabic trend is threatening to establish 'Sheep' on the grave of 'Bighorn.'

Part of last winter I spent on the Mohave Desert at a ranch, associated with some boys who were keen on natural history. *Onychomys* was plentiful and easily trapped. I gave the boys their choice of its various names, *Onychomys*, Mole-mouse, Bobtailed Deermouse, Grasshopper Mouse, and Calling-Mouse. I gave the reasons for each name, and asked them which they preferred. The first two did not receive very long consideration. 'Grasshopper Mouse' in spite of explanations, they thought too suggestive of 'Kangaroo-rat;' the hopping dominated their thought. All agreed finally, that 'Calling-Mouse' was the best name. A week later I found that this was the only one that they remembered, which seems to me a very important evidence of its value as a name.

I had a similar experience with 'Antelope Chipmunk' vs. 'Cottontail Chipmunk.' The latter was easy to say, pat, descriptive, and worked with familiar ideas. Antelope are unknown now, therefore 'Cottontail Chipmunk' won. So, also, 'Little 4-striped Chipmunk' had no chance with 'Snow-chipmunk.'

Every naturalist will recall examples of the same sort, and the struggle between the imitation English and the really evolved English name. The ultimate survival of the latter is inevitable.

There is one other case that should be considered, and that is 'Mammal' vs. 'Quadruped' or 'Animal.' The popular and English names for the creatures under consideration, are 'brutes,' 'beasts,' 'quadrupeds' or 'animals.' 'Mammal' is bastard Latin, not English, and seems never likely to be. 'Quadruped' was accepted by Audubon, Bachman, Kennicott, and many others, and has become English, for custom has excluded the frogs, lizards, and turtles from the quadruped list just as completely as it has the tables and chairs. But 'animal' is even more widely established now, and, in the restricted sense of 'mammal' is accepted by the Century Dictionary. We may as well do the same thing.

Of course the bookmen in defense of their position hark back to the original meaning, the derivation of the word. To this, I reply, such an argument, if allowed full weight, would abolish the English language altogether.

Original meaning has no weight whatever against national usage. These broad conclusions, then, will, I think prove acceptable:

That as soon as familiar with an animal, the popular mind evolves a name for it, and that name is nearly always better than the artificial product of some scientist.

That an enormous impetus is given to the study, as soon as we get good names.

Let us therefore accept the book names proposed until better are found, but let us encourage everyone interested to gather up, record, develop, suggest, or invent a good name, whenever the opportunity or the inspiration arrives.

Then we shall have the irresistible power of the genius of English backing the study, instead of bucking it, as at present.

Yours very sincerely,
Ernest Thompson Seton.

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